

[By Jack Thurston](#)

Congressman Peter Welch, D-Vt., expressed frustration Tuesday at what he called "Congressional inaction" that he said is damaging America.

"Congress has a job to do for the American people, and it's not doing it," Welch said. "America needs a Farm Bill."

Vermont's lone member of the U.S. House of Representatives said the House is dragging its heels on discussing a new five-year Farm Bill, a major piece of legislation that covers a wide range of agricultural issues. The current Farm Bill expires September 30.

Some house conservatives want spending cuts to nutrition, conservation, and other programs in the omnibus legislation, but many democrats are pushing for action on what they call a fresh set of approaches to addressing the needs of farmers today. Welch and colleagues have pushed for House leaders from the GOP to take up the issue, but so far, no debate has been scheduled, Welch said.

"They need to get this thing done," Sheldon, Vt. dairy farmer Bill Rowell said, describing what he dubbed "issue dodging" by Speaker of the House John Boehner, R-Ohio. "And I happen to be a Republican. But to sit down on the job? You know, when we have a crop in the field, we don't go on vacation."

Proposed legislation in the Farm Bill, which Welch noted already passed the House Agriculture

Committee in a bipartisan vote, would do away with subsidy payments to dairy farmers. Those would be replaced with a voluntary insurance program that would kick in when milk prices drop and costs rise. Dairy producers would then cut production to bring prices back up.

A similar "safety net" idea for farmers passed the U.S. Senate, championed by Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., the senior member of the Senate Agriculture Committee.

Vermont farmers like Bill Rowell say with feed prices so high right now, many are barely breaking even on their herds.

"The margins in dairy today are razor thin, if they exist," Rowell said.

Vermont has far more dairy farms than any other New England state, at around 920, according to data from the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture. But USDA numbers show the total Vermont farm count has been slipping significantly over the past several years. In just the past 12 months, three dozen Vermont dairy operations closed.

"We anticipate there will continue to be farms that have to make those decisions as to whether or not they can continue to produce milk in the months and year ahead," said Leon Berthiaume, the manager of northwestern Vermont's St. Albans Cooperative Creamery.

Congressman Welch acknowledged the drought gripping the Midwest will likely complicate the way Washington addresses agriculture concerns: it'll require disaster aid, Welch said, but also drive up feed prices, further hurting cash-strapped dairy families.

"The fact that it's a difficult job is not an excuse for Congress to not do its job," Welch said.

"These are truly important issues for our dairy farmers," added Rep. Bill Owens, D-N.Y., who has worked closely with Welch on pushing the Farm Bill's advancement. "But they're also

important issues for any community that has farming in it. You have equipment dealers, you have seed dealers, you have schools that depend upon what's happening in the farm community. All of those groups depend upon us doing our job, as Peter points out, and we're not doing a very good job of getting that done."

Welch and Owens have found bipartisan support in their calls for debate of the Farm Bill. Rep. Kristi Noem, R-S.D., and Welch led a group of more than 75 House members urging Rep. Boehner to take up the issue soon.

Welch called a possible one-year extension of current policies, instead of the overhaul the new five-year Farm Bill calls for, "no solution," and just more of the same "broken approach" to dairy.

Congress is expected to adjourn August 3 for a summer break, and reconvene Sept. 10, according to a news release from Rep. Welch's office. Welch and Owens said they would like to pass a bill and get it on President Obama's desk by the expiration date of the Farm Bill, Sept. 30.